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An Autumn near the Rhine; or Sketches of courts, society, scenery, &c. in some of the German states bordering on the Rhine

Dodd, Charles Edward

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Letter XXVII.

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LETTER XXVII.

WE embarked, early in the morning, on board the *Diligence d'eau*, which departs daily from Mayence for Cologne — a narrow comfortless vessel, in which the passengers are stowed, with an assortment of sundry packages, in an inconvenient cabin. The sun, half obscured by the fogs from the river, glared forth with a murky redness, burnishing the broad smooth face of the river, and giving a striking effect to the scenes from which we glided. Cassel, with its houses and light minaret steeple, stood out a little black promontory in the bed of liquid fire connected by the dark bridge of boats, with the venerable red towers and buildings of Mayence, which looked doubly striking in the halo of ruddy mist which covered them. It is at Bingen that the fine scenery of the Rhine commences — but between Mayence and Bingen the country has all

the charm of luxuriant richness and a mixed cultivation.

The splendid chateau of Biberich, the residence of the Grand Duke of Nassau, appeared on the edge of the river. The Grand Duchy of Nassau is one of the most picturesque and fertile territories of Germany. It runs along the right bank of the Rhine from Cassel opposite Mayence, to the junction of the river Lahn with the Rhine near Coblentz—comprehending the luxuriant Rhingau, Hochheim, Johannisberg, Rüdesheim, and all the other genial spots which regale, with pure Rhenish, the *bons vivans* of Europe. Hochheim stands on a little sunny elevation on the Main, between Frankfort and Mayence.—The little town is surrounded by vineyards, with scarcely a tree to obstruct a single ray of sun—but the choice wine of the place, which every turtle-fed alderman flatters himself he drinks, is produced on a little hill of about eight acres, behind the ancient deanery, which seems formed to court the sun, and is protected by the town from the north winds. Each acre contains about

4000 vine plants, valued at a ducat a-piece; and the little hill produces, in a good year, about twelve large casks of wine, each of which sometimes sells, as soon as made, for 1500 florins (nearly 150*l.*). Hochheim was made a present, by Buonaparte to General Kellerman.

The Grand Duke of Nassau is an active, sensible, and popular young Prince. His government is well organised, and his state reckoned very prosperous. He has little or no debt — the freedom of the press exists in a high degree in his state — Wisbaden, his capital is the place of publication of the *Rheinische Blatte*, one of the most liberal Journals of Germany — and a national representation is now completely established in Nassau.

Below Biberich the Rhine has the appearance of a wide lake ornamented by two long green islands, after passing which, commences the famous district of the Rhingau. This Bacchanalian paradise, which extends on the right bank to Lorrich, several leagues below Bingen, has from time out of mind been renowned for its superior vines. An

old Carlovingian King first gave it to an Archbishop of Mayence, and it was surrounded by a rampart and ditch, some remains of which are still visible at Biberich. The current is here very slow, and as the wind was against us, and the ill-organised boat presented no facilities for rowing, we glided leisurely on with its course. A bold amphitheatre of mountains reared their dark woody heads in the distance. Nearer lay the fine undulating country of the Rhingau, "depressed in valleys, protuberant in hills, and diversified by a thousand inequalities." Its sunny hills and vine-covered slopes, spotted by white country houses, villas, and steeples — villages and ruined convents lying in the valleys; while the old walled towns of Walluff, Ellfeld, and Erbach reared their Gothic turrets immediately on the banks of the river. At some distance from the river rose the Johannisberg Mount, the rival of Hochheim, covered with a garden of vines and crowned by a chateau of the Count Metternich, originally the religious cloister of St. John. The wine produced here is the

dearest and most precious of the Rhenish wines.

The course of the river presently appeared blocked up by the chain of mountains before us; but on arriving at Rudesheim, a busy little town at the foot of the bold mountain on which is produced the famous Rudesheimer wine, an abrupt turn in the river presented to us the gulf between rocky mountains, through which it pursues its course. At the mouth of this gulf stands the town of Bingen, embosomed in vineyards, at the edge of the stream, which is here joined by the little river Nah. The change of scene is instantaneous and striking. The fine open expanse of country at once vanishes, and is succeeded by romantic defiles of mountains hemming in the river, doubling the impetuosity of its course, and more than compensating for the cheerful scenes we had passed, by their wilder but not less fertile beauties. This style of scenery, more or less wild and picturesque, continues nearly 100 miles, as far as Bonn, where the river enters the vast level through which it continues its course to the sea.

The rugged form of the mountains at

the entrance of the gulf of Bingen, and the immense sandy flat through which the river has wandered before, have given rise to the conjecture that its course was formerly entirely stopped here — when its waters spread themselves in a vast lake, over the plain round Manheim, Mayence, Spires, Frankfort, Darmstadt, &c. Some great convulsion of nature is supposed to have opened them the narrow passage they now have through the Rhingau mountains — In support of this theory, shells and fish-bones have been discovered high up on the sides of the mountains, and their shape has been thought to present vestiges of the incursions of waves.

Bingen is a considerable little town, with an old Gothic Church and massy turreted ramparts. A neat stone bridge crosses the Nah, which flows out of a romantic valley, and forms the boundary between the Grand Duchy of Hesse and the Prussian provinces.

The motley crew of the boat, as little interesting as any collection of individuals I ever was among, all turned out to dine at the White Horse, at Bingen, a little

inn by the river side. The table d'hôte furnished us with the usual bill of fare of a small German inn — meagre soup, leaving the *bouilli* that followed all rags, and to be made palatable by cucumbers and a sort of small strong turnip in raw slices, swimming in vinegar — then followed a strong acid hash of hare, sausages, and sour kroust, and other savoury *entremets*, summed up by the invariable joints of oily *baked* mutton and veal — a spit being a luxury which few German kitchens afford. The desert was as usual, clean and delicate, and not without the dainty little pile of sponge cakes, which are never forgotten in the dirtiest inn that affords a dinner. Though in face of the rich mountain, the Rudesheimer wine was not so good as we might have procured a hundred miles distant.

Some of our crew having replenished their pipes to take a digesting puff after dinner, and others having filled their pockets with apples and grapes, to munch away the *ennui* of gazing at the fine scenery, we jumped into the barge, and pushed out into the stream. In a few moments we were floated into the eddying current of

the famous Bingen Loch — a few rocks, barely concealed by water, which stretching nearly across the river, leave a small channel near the right bank for a safe passage. Although there is nothing formidable in the appearance of these shallows, they have caused many serious accidents. A Swiss merchant on board told us they had wrecked a large cargo of his merchandise. Our fears did not prevent our observing at leisure the renowned *Mouse Tower* which rises just here on a rock in the middle of the river — a crumbling ruin — reminding us of the tradition of old Archbishop Hatto's ignoble death by ravenous rats, and of Mr. Southey's ballad on the subject, which you doubtless remember.

It is difficult to give you an idea of the luxuriant richness and beauty of the scenes we now passed. The mountains rose on each side, sometimes in rugged masses, and sometimes in round regular slopes, immediately from the banks of the river. The right bank is far more fruitful than the left — for several leagues from Bingen its range of mountains is one verdant garden — covered from the summit to the base

with the light green verdure of the well-trained vineyards — here and there interspersed with ridges and masses of rough black rock, whose rude shapes defy cultivation. On the left, on a dangerous ledge overhanging the river, and rarely with any safeguard, runs the Route Napoleon, along which, a few months ago, we drove towards Mayence, in the brightest days of summer. This magnificent road, cut with incredible labour out of the rocks which overhang the river, runs by its side from Cologne to Bingen — sometimes under craggy shelves and abrupt rocks, covered with brushwood and heather, and interspersed with a few vineyards, in spots smooth enough to bear them — sometimes across little fertile plains where the mountains slightly recede from the stream — or through orchards, vineyards, and antique villages at their base. The black purply hue of the rocks, frequently composed of basalt, slate, &c. contrasted with the delicate green of the vines which thrive in all their gullies and crevices adds to the mellow luxuriant tone of the scene. A bacchanalian might drink in intoxication from the view — every thing

has a blushing vinous colour — if there was such a thing as an Alderman of imagination his lips would water in descending the Rhine.

Passing the little slated village of Asmannhausen, whose red wine is one of the most celebrated in the country, and the old ruined castles of Königstein and Falkenberg, the town of Lorrich presented itself on the right bank, at the foot of a steep mountain, called the Kedrich, or the Devil's Ladder. The inhabitants say the Devil once attempted to mount it on horseback. Just behind Lorrich opens a narrow valley, called the *Wisper Thal*, or Whispering Valley; the defiles of which give a shrill whistling sound to the north-east wind, which the country people call the *Wisper Wind*, and consider a great phenomenon. Lorrich is the boundary of the Rhingau; and though the vineyards continue as far as Bonn, they are nowhere so rich and so copious as in this favoured district. In traversing the Rhingau, the Rhine runs nearly in the direction of East to West; so that the right bank is constantly exposed to the southern suns,

while the left is kept comparatively barren by the winds from the north. Scarcely any of the celebrated wines are made on the left bank. The Rhingau is divided into superior and inferior cantons, relatively to the excellence of their wines.—The former contain the villages on the heights;—the latter those on the banks of the river. The strongest wines are said to be made on the highest grounds — the most wholesome on those of moderate height — and the wine of the low grounds is sour and requires keeping. Among the multitude of wines which the country produces, the *Laubenheim*, *Bisheim*, and *Asmann-hausen* are considered the most agreeable — those of *Hochheim* and *Johannisberg* the most aromatic — and those of *Nierstein* *Markebrunn*, and *Rüdesheim* the strongest and most spirituous — a nicety of discrimination which at all events vouches for the connoisseurship of the worthy Germans in such matters, and which may give hints to some of our London amateurs of the grape.

Below Lorrich the mountains slightly diminish — the town of Bacharach appears on the left bank with its mouldering

ramparts half covered with vines — and with that gloomy slated Gothic character which distinguishes all the towns on the Rhine. *Bons vivans* of all ages appear to have been of one mind as to the wine of Bacharach. The Romans called the place *Bacchi ara*. Pope Æneas Sylvius used to import a tun of the wine to Rome every year; and the Emperor Venceslaus was so fond of it that he sold the citizens of Nuremberg their freedom for four casks. We passed the true *ara Bacchi*, a little lower down — a stone lying in the river between an island and the right bank. Its appearance above the water is hailed with joy by the vintagers as a sign of a dry and hot season.

We presently entered a long reach of the river which opened to us its placid and majestic course for some distance, between mountains green with vineyards and chequered with ruined castles on the summit, and spires and villages at the base. We went on shore a moment at Caub—the bargeman to pay a toll to the Grand Duke of Nassau, and a little German broker, of London, and a jovial Prussian officer to take in fresh wine

and tobacco, for consumption in the cabin. The grey ruins of the old Castle of Gutenfels crown a steep mountain, above the town, on which Gustavus Adolphus is said to have stood, giving his orders, in the thirty years war, to attack the Spaniards posted on the opposite side. On a rock, in the middle of the Rhine, opposite Caub, is a grotesque building with about fifty little slated spires and turrets, precisely resembling extinguishers. It is called the *Pfalz*, and is said to have been the favourite place of *accouchement* of the old Countesses of the Palatinate. It contains also some caverns which have served for a state prison, a purpose for which it seems infinitely more fitted, and a singular well whose spring is unconnected with the Rhine.

We glided down to Oberwesel on the left bank, formerly one of the most important of the Rhenish towns, and like all the rest inclosed in mouldering walls and fortifications, with massy round Towers, a necessary bulwark against the predatory habits of former ages. Two-thirds of the ruins which now give a Gothic interest to the banks of

the Rhine, and indeed to all the mountainous scenery in the neighbourhood, were, as you well know, the haunts of those illustrious *Chevaliers Voleurs*, whose chivalry consisted in pillaging poor merchants and peaceful towns — the worthy ancestry with whom our noble German friends are so eager to make out their relationship. In the thirteenth century the commerce of the Rhenish towns was so harassed by these patrician highwaymen, that Arnaud Walpoden, a citizen of Mayence, persuaded the merchants to form a league of defence with the other towns. More than a hundred towns on the Rhine joined it, besides many Princes, Counts, and *Seigneurs*, more civilized than their brethren. The castles of many of the robbers were burnt, and have remained picturesque ruins from those days to these; this was the origin of the famous Hanseatic league, which has contributed so much to the growth of the commerce of Europe.

From Oberwesel to St. Goar the banks are more wild and rugged than in any other parts of the voyage. Perpendicular mountains and rough black rocks with few vines

or vegetation of any sort give them an air of dreary wildness. The river is here narrow and deep, and glides on with a majestic tranquillity. In a short reach of the stream between two abrupt turns it has the appearance of a full deep lake, hemmed in on all sides by rugged inhospitable mountains. In these wilds the hermit St. Goar established himself of old for the pious purpose of preaching Christianity to the fishermen and vintagers on the banks of the river — giving his name to the little towns of St. Goar and St. Goar-hausen. A black basalt rock rears its angular shape above the river, sending forth a remarkable echo to which the bargemen called our attention. Our experimental shouts were reverberated several times from rock to rock, and we were assured that a horn would have produced an echo that would frighten us. On leaving by a short turn in the river this gloomy scene, the aspect of the little town of St. Goar, stretching its houses along the edge of the river in a fine verdant country, presents a striking and agreeable contrast. Its handsome white Caserne was occupied by a few Prussian troops, and there was an air of bustling in-

dustry in the town. The castle of Rheinfels, one of the most considerable on the Rhine, stands on a perpendicular rock above St. Goar; and its spacious walls are still blackened by its conflagration in the revolutionary war. A peaceful monastery formerly occupied its place, which the Count Thierrri the Rich, of Catzennelenbogen transformed into a strong hold, where he kept his martial Court, and forced the vessels on the Rhine to pay him a tribute in passing. Sixty of the Rhenish towns opposed themselves to this oppression and blockaded the Count in his castle for fifteen months without success; but he was at last brought to quiet behaviour by the more formidable confederation before mentioned.

I left the boat at St. Goar and walked along the *Route Napoleon* to Boppard where we passed the night. It was a fine still evening and the mountains on the opposite bank sometimes crowned with trees tinted by autumn — the village of St. Goar-hausen with a white mansion of the Duke of Nassau washed by the gliding stream — the peasants paddling their little shallops homewards from the vineyards, formed a pleasant

scene of repose. Troops of peasants were hewing further incursions into the rocks, to widen the road which has been already much improved by the Prussians. In a nook on the opposite bank the little town of Welmich reared its Gothic tower and dark slated houses immediately under the mountain, near which stand the towers of two ruined castles which go by the name of the Cat and the Mouse, for what reason I could not learn. Passing a village just before Boppard I was struck by a full sound of music issuing from a little church standing half-way up the mountain. The peasants were at vespers,—the illuminated windows glimmered through the gloom of the evening, and the swelling sounds of the organ had a fine effect in the dark stillness around.

It was night when I reached Boppard, and the aquatic diligence had just arrived. The little Broker and the bulky Prussian Captain were already established, with two or three other lovers of good cheer, puffing away in a crowded room with their Rhenish before them — while a want of beds obliged us, not unwillingly, to join the Swiss mer-

chant at another Inn, where we found him intently busied with a German book of travels in our country which he was preparing to visit with enthusiastic curiosity. The little Inn furnished us a well served supper of *Krammets Vogel* (fieldfares) sausages, &c. some good Johannisberg, and beds as comfortable as a German Inn generally affords. A post bedstead is a luxury only known in palaces, and curtains are very rare accommodations. Instead of blankets you are covered with a feather bed thrown over you, often in a green silk case, which being rather of a lubricous quality you have generally the satisfaction of finding, when you wake, on the floor by the bedside. In the best Inn soap is a luxury which the people of the house rather stare when you ask for; and your demand if pressed is generally answered by a little dab of glutinous stuff like oil paint, which is the soap used in the kitchen. Besides the common *Speise Saal* or eating saloon, the best German Inns (even those at Frankfort, which are reckoned very superior) never afford more than one or two saloons for private parties, which are generally reserved for

guests of unusual distinction. The humbler parties use for a sitting-room the bedroom of one of the party. The first time I made a stay at an Inn at Frankfort, in company with some foreign friends, I hesitated at following a lady of the party who entered a bed-room opened by the waiter — imagining she was entering the chamber appropriated for her use; but my fair friend perceiving my embarrassment called out to me to follow her, assuring me that in a German Inn we were to expect no other parlour. The only part of their household economy in which the Germans show any idea of true comfort are their stoves, which, though they want the charms of a blazing social fire, circulate a soft equable heat which is very agreeable. Our crackling grates are a happy remedy against winter — but the stoves make you entirely forget it. They relieve you from the *business* of keeping warm; and you find yourself without trouble in a genial atmosphere.